

## A DEACON'S "RAISON D'ETRE"

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Some years ago, following a church service in which I had taken part, the rector's wife was heard to remark, "To look at that young man, you would never suspect that he could not qualify for the priesthood." This essay provides me, at long last, with an opportunity to reply, and to explain why one might remain a deacon, not from incompetence, but by choice.

Historically, of course, the diaconate needs neither justification nor apology. It was once a recognized order of the ministry, with distinct functions of its own. To this day, in some branches of Christendom, the deacon still retains his separate identity. In the Episcopal Church, however, the diaconate has atrophied. The Prayer Book itself is partly responsible. In the service for the ordering of deacons, one of the prayers expresses the hope that they "may so well behave themselves in this inferior office, that they may be worthy to be called unto the higher ministries (p. 535)." Small wonder that the diaconate is regarded as merely a stepping stone to the priesthood, an apprenticeship to be discharged as quickly as possible.

My own reasons for remaining a deacon, however, would probably not satisfy the stickler for canon law. They are based, less upon historical grounds, than upon contemporary circumstances. They are similar to the reasons which have prompted churchmen like Bishop Robinson to call for a radical rethinking of traditional Christian belief and practice. Most of these arguments point, in one way or another, to one insistent fact: the ministry, as presently conceived, has lost its effectiveness. This is most obviously true in the vast urban areas, where Christian influence has dwindled to insignificance. It is less obvious, but equally true, in the suburbs, where church membership is impressive, but where a veneer of Christian forms and symbols conceals an underlying culture-religion which is often indistinguishable from paganism.

Consider first the Church's abdication from the modern metropolis. A dramatic example is the parish of Woolwich, in Bishop Robinson's own diocese. It is a run-down parish in a depressed area of greater London, with a total of 12,000 people. For the past five years a blue ribbon team of four dynamic young clergymen have labored night and day to breathe life into the remains of this once flourishing congregation. Their accomplishments are summarized, in the following words, by the rector:

We have tried to pray and to love. We have tried to be humble and sensitive. We have played every card in the pack... We have done everything we set out to do. We have raised a fortune and spent it. But we have achieved virtually none of the modest things we had hoped for. If each priest on our staff had persuaded ten people each year to join the church, we should have had a congregation of 400. Yet the regular members of the congregation have increased from about fifty to 100, mostly from socially superior areas outside our working class parish. We have quite obviously failed.<sup>13</sup>

Here is proof positive that the priesthood, as currently conceived, can no longer make contact with the realities of the twentieth century. No one can say that the four priests failed for lack of talent, or dedication, or effort, or training, or money. They failed, either because Christianity itself is passé, or because the ministry in its present form does not mediate the Gospel. Those who deny the latter explanation must be prepared to accept the former.

In the suburban churches, the picture is quite different, at least on the surface. Church membership is at an all-time high, at least in the United States; "religion" is becoming an increasingly

popular subject in colleges and universities, in magazines and moving pictures, and even at cocktail parties; and even the perennial shortage of clergy has become less acute. Nevertheless, the upsurge of interest in “religion” does not necessarily mean a revival of Christianity. It could, in fact, spell the opposite. For the real danger to Christianity has never been atheism, but some rival religion, and the threat is most deadly when the rival masquerades in Christian garb.

Today’s impostor has been unmasked by a self-critical group of Christian sociologists. Gibson Winter, for example, documents the evidence in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*. Peter Berger does the same in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*. The suburban church, they point out, is not so much a place where consciences are pricked as it is a forum for self-congratulation; less a medium of divine judgment than a mirror for magnifying middle-class values; less a source of renewal than an outlet for romantic sentiment.

All this is scarcely the fault of the individual clergyman. He is rather the victim of the system. He often has a clear idea of what he would like to accomplish, but is prevented by the public image which society fastens upon him. His time and energy are preempted by an endless round of administrative detail, trivial meetings, and ceremonial appearances. Most frustrating of all, the words he uses do not seem to get through. People imagine that they know in advance whatever a clergyman might have to say. If he does not actually say it, they attribute this to inarticulateness on his part. The cutting edge of the Gospel is blunted by the mass of religious clichés with which the modern mind is stuffed. No wonder that, as numerous surveys have shown, a startling number of parish clergy would leave their posts if they could. Their discontent does not betray a lack of faith, but rather the opposite. They are thwarted by subtle pressures which prevent them from putting their faith into practice.

Like a twentieth-century monarch, the priest is the prisoner of society’s expectations. Like the monarch, he too has been progressively shorn of his powers. He was once the best educated man in town; today his educational advantage is often hard to detect. He was once an arbiter of manners; today he is a favorite subject of caricature. His was once a vocation for sons of the nobility; today he must often overcome parental opposition. He was once a prize catch for the town belle; today the wife of an English vicar has written a warning to all eligible young ladies never to marry a minister. His plight has been described by O. Hobart Mowrer, the psychologist:

Politicians, union and management executives, scientists are the *real* prophets today. Social workers and public agencies *really* deal with the poor, hungry, sick, jailed, orphaned, prostitutes, elderly and delinquent. The psychoanalyst, psychiatrist and clinical psychologist *really* help troubled, neurotic, guilty lost souls. Unions and secular civil rights groups engage in *real* social action....No wonder we have trouble recruiting for the ministry!<sup>14</sup>

No single reason can be given for this state of affairs. It is the cumulative result of a series of causes historical, sociological, and theological. The theological cause is the one which I want especially to single out, for it is the one which the Church, particularly through its deacons, can most readily overcome. I refer to the psychological chasm which now exists between clergy and laity. That such a chasm exists at all is often stoutly and sincerely denied by a great many priests. But it is not denied by the layman. It can be demonstrated by a simple experiment. Let a clergyman in civilian dress be introduced to a stranger as “Mr. Parker.” Then, after half an hour or so, let it be known that Mr. Parker is a clergyman. The change in the stranger’s demeanor will speak for itself. He will become shy and self-conscious, wondering whether he has said anything to offend. Or he may feel called upon to demonstrate his moral earnestness or spiritual sensitivity. More refreshingly, he may go out of his way to show how

profane and cynical he can be. The one thing he will hardly ever do is to remain the same. The priestly presence makes him ill at ease, it puts him on the defensive.

The principal cause of this estrangement is theological. The Church's teaching has often suggested that the priest lives on a higher plane than other mortals. A recent article in a Roman Catholic magazine says this explicitly. The priest, it insists, is raised above the mundane sphere of time and multiplicity to the loftier realm of eternity, unity, and truth. The layman, belonging to the lower realm, "has not the charism of clear discernment....He does not clearly see; he can, so to speak, only hear and act."<sup>15</sup> In effect, this means that the clergy give the orders and the laity carry them out. Nor may the priest step down from Olympus to share the layman's burden or to take responsibility for the fate of the world. The priest who does so "violates his own vocation, laicizes himself in his heart, and ultimately, because of this corruption of values, becomes thoroughly committed to the temporal sphere."<sup>16</sup>

Such a relation between clergy and laity is hardly biblical. In fact, the Bible rejects the natural tendency of so many religions to invest the priesthood with a mystique. The Bible recognizes differences of function, but not of caste, for God is no respecter of persons.

The present chasm between clergy and laity is rather a corruption of biblical teaching. Though its causes are complex, the clergy did at least acquiesce in being put on a pedestal. In so doing, they brought about their own eventual demise. For a pedestal makes a poor base of operations. As medieval womanhood discovered, to be worshipped from afar is to be dependent upon the whim of the worshipper. When the layman finally tired of being a second-class Christian, the priest was by-passed, the object of public praise but private indifference. Having consented to play the role of a man apart, he now finds himself performing to an empty house.

In these circumstances, the deacon may have a special role to play. He is often in a better position than the priest to break out of this ecclesiastical quarantine. Belonging to a less exalted order, he is less conspicuously tarred with the sacerdotal brush, under less constraint to speak for the ecclesiastical establishment (or the entrenchment, as it has been called). The Roman Catholic Church has tacitly admitted as much by agreeing to discuss the possibility of permitting deacons to marry. The proposal itself acknowledges that the deacon has not completely lost his amateur standing. With one foot in the church and the other in the world, he may help to draw both close together.

Exactly how he does this is a matter for creative experiment. One novel proposal has been made by the rector of Woolwich, with the blessing of his bishop: namely, that the minister would be taken more seriously if he earned his living at a secular job. In the present day, everybody works. Even the millionaire spends the day at his office. Earning a livelihood is part of being human. Yet the minister is an exception, or appears to be. Even though, in fact, he is on call twenty-four hours a day, on a job that requires extraordinary dedication and versatility, he is in the eyes of many people, a parasite. He appears to work at no gainful occupation, and to live off the charity of his congregation. As a result, he is often held in disrespect, as an incompetent who cannot cope with the real world, or he is looked upon as one who stands aloof, who does not share in the common human lot, and who is, therefore, unqualified to deal with the issues of everyday life.

In biblical times it was not so. There was a strong rabbinical tradition, inherited by the early Christians, that the spiritual leader of a community should earn his living at a regular trade. Christ himself was a carpenter, St. Peter a fisherman, and St. Paul a tent maker. With St. Paul it was a matter of pride to pay his own way from city to city by plying his trade.

Before admitting defeat, the rector of Woolwich proposes to apply this apostolic example to his own Church. He plans to appoint a lay bursar to administer the parish, so that the clergy can earn their

own living at secular jobs. They will, of course, have far less time to devote to strictly “religious” matters. By identifying themselves with the common lot of all men, however, they may achieve more than they did as full-time parish organizers. The result will be significant for the whole Church.

Nor is it just in impoverished parishes like Woolwich that the minister is handicapped by not supporting himself. His economic dependence is even more of a handicap in the “captive” suburban church, particularly in the discharge of his prophetic function. He can hardly call a spade a spade if, as has been charged, he is the spiritual errand boy of the rich.

In the Middle Ages the post of rector or vicar often carried with it an independent income; this is so even today in parts of England. While this undoubtedly was a temptation to slothfulness and to social conservatism, it did free the rector from the purse-strings of his flock. He could speak the unpopular truth without fear of a cut in salary. The minister of today, by contrast, must reckon with reprisals from vested interests. His position is more like that of chaplain to a medieval nobleman, whose position was secure so long as he confined himself to “spiritual” matters and did not presume to comment upon the master’s private or public affairs.

One thinks, immediately, of the race question, and of the anguish of sincere ministers who must reckon with sub-Christian attitudes among their congregations. Those who take a stand are hounded out of their churches. Others muffle their indignation because of economic responsibilities to their families. In neither case is the word of God proclaimed as it could be if the clergyman were economically independent. As Harvey Cox has recently written:

The only way in which the clergy can ever change the way in which the word they use is perceived is to refuse to play the role of antiquarian and medicine man in which society casts them, but this is difficult, because it is what they are paid for.<sup>17</sup>

It is hardly possible (even if it were desirable) to return to medieval practice, but it is quite possible to return to that of the earliest Christians, where the minister’s economic independence preserved him from spiritual captivity. Protected against economic reprisals, he was free to declare the word of God against the *status quo*. Perhaps that explains why St. Paul could write so frankly to the Corinthians, and also why they took his words to heart: he owed them not a cent.

The rector of Woolwich intends his suggestion for priests as well as deacons. For most priests today, however, secular employment is scarcely a live option. Even if they were willing and qualified, their congregations would object. There are exceptions: the Reverend John C. Danforth, for example, spends the weekdays at his St. Louis law firm, and the weekends with his congregation. To the majority of Christians, however, the thought of a priest of the Church living by the sweat of his brow remains incongruous, if not abhorrent.

For the deacon, however, the obstacles are not so great. His “non-commissioned” rank enables him to hold a secular job without causing so many raised eyebrows. By immersing himself in the real problems of real people, he may help to heal the breach between the Church and the world. Sitting more loosely to vested ecclesiastical interests, he may help the Church to rejoin the human race, and so to recover its original mission.

Not many have chosen this vocation. Perhaps not many should. But it is a plausible approach to one of Christianity’s most pressing problems: the problem of reuniting minister and layman – whom God would join together, but whom man has put asunder. When this problem has been overcome, then this particular deacon will have lost his *raison d’être*.